The Inescapable Question
Matthew 21:1-11
April 4, 1971, Palm Sunday
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I think there is no day in the Church year that so vividly portrays what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ as does Palm Sunday. At Christmas we reflect on the incredible idea that God loves us enough to come among us. During Lent we reflect on the suffering of Jesus Christ. At Easter we celebrate his victory over death in which we participate. But today, Palm Sunday, is a day that compels us toward introspection. We must, in honest observance of this day, look deeply into our own hearts and measure our faith, our commitment, our discipleship in a setting that sounds very real, very immediate and as contemporary as today's newspaper.

But first there was celebration: a colorful, loud, happy festival. The first order of the day is his triumphant entry, his welcome to the city of David. We are inclined, I think, to regard the events of the day as largely accidental. He came: he was recognized: a spontaneous parade erupted. And we feel good about that because it seems as if once - this once - he received the great out pouring of affection and devotion he deserved. But Palm Sunday is more subtle than that: there is more here than an enthusiastic welcoming party.

He came to Jerusalem on the first day of Passover week. That, by itself, was a rather normal thing for a faithful Jew to do. The ancient historian Josephus estimated that two million religious pilgrims visited the capital city annually for Passover. The Passover, you will recall, is the yearly holiday that remembers and celebrates Israel's liberation from Egyptian slavery. It is a deeply meaningful occasion for every Jew today. In the first century it was meaningful because at that moment Israel was again a captive people this time on her own soil..

The Roman authorities were rightly nervous during the Passover. So were their puppets - the temple functionaries. There had been violence in the past during the Passover when the Roman authorities had bluntly demanded official

recognition of Caesar. If there ever was a time for insurrection it was during the Passover. The "feel" of the occasion can be compared only to a Fourth of July Celebration in Washington, D. C. if this country were occupied by foreign troops, with a puppet ruler in the White House.

Well, Jesus could have walked into the city like any other pilgrim; celebrated the Passover inconspicuously, and gone home. But instead, he chose a very curious pattern of behavior. He went to considerable trouble to procure an ass on which to ride - a strange thing to do in that the distance from Bethany to Jerusalem is exactly one and a half miles, and nowhere else in the Gospel narrative do we read that Jesus rode on a beast of burden.

He was, in fact, deliberately acting out a familiar and important prophetic passage from the Old Testament: "Rejoice greatly O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you: triumphant and victorious is he: humble and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass." [Zech. 9:9]

That particular passage was close to the heart of every patriotic Jew. The Jews had been waiting for a Messiah for centuries: and the deep, historical longing was sharpened to a fine edge yearly during the Passover. So he came, and who could have missed the imagery? Who could have failed to perceive what he was saying, and the claim he was making? The crowd knew: the moment had come: hearts quickened: branches were stripped from the trees and cloaks from their backs. "Hossana!" - which means "God save us!" filled the air. "The whole city was stirred", Matthew records, asking "Who is this?"

If you were a disciple, it was a great moment, filled with charisma and potential. He could have, at the moment, launched a revolution. If you were a governmental authority, it was an ominous moment, fraught with danger and your mind would have been busily concocting the schematat by which this rabble rouser could be eliminated. If you were an average Jerusalemite, it was an ambiguous, difficult moment - in which you felt yourself being pushed into a

decision you really didn't want to make. You had nothing against him: you weren't particularly for him - you certainly didn't relish the prospect of taking a personal stand: you wanted nothing so much as for him to go back where he came from so you could return to business as usual.

Jesus knew all of this as he made the decision to come to Jerusalem. He knew what his coming would do. He knew that he probably would not live through the week. He paused a moment before entering Jerusalem and wept, and we know in that poignant expression, that he was acutely aware of everything that was about to happen. He came into the city, I believe, to provoke a confrontation. His goal, I believe, was clearly to pose the question Matthew tells us the city did ask - "Who is this?" And in that question I feel the significance of this day for you and for me. "Who is this one who comes into our midst?"

It is interesting to speculate what would have transpired had he not come: or had he come quietly. Galilee was quiet and safe. We have no reason to believe that he could not have continued his ministry of teaching and healing in the small villages around the lake. We have no reason to believe that he could not have lived to a ripe old age, slowly building his following, gradually establishing his people. Think of the good he could have done: think of the sick who could have been healed. He lived just 33 years.

He chose not to be practical. I believe, because the very essence of his life and ministry is precisely that confrontation between his claim and both the individual and the social, political and economic structures of society. He came into the city because Galilee, given its quiet comfort and security, was on the periphery. The city was where the decisions were made. In the city the economic rules were established. In the city the integrity of Judaism was affirmed or denied. The city, their as now, was where the action was. The city, and all it symbolized, was the place where the question had to be asked and answered: "Who is this?"

There is a hard lesson in that, which men have been notoriously reluctant

to learn. Our Lord marched right into the capital city, claimed the rights to Kingship, overturned the tables in the Temple, and still the vast majority of Christians wish that the institutional Church would keep its ecclessiastical nose out of the controversial, life and death, social issues of the day. Our Lord marched into a crowded capital, bursting with two million visitors, and before he was done everyone in the city had been forced to make answer to the question: "Who is this?" And still the vast majority of Americans scurry under the umbrella of Christianity without ever considering what it means to follow this Lord.

He marched into what is a classic revolutionary setting - and refused to be used for petty political gain. He would not be the tool of the zealots who wanted armed insurrection against Rome; nor would he be exploited by the Establishment for the purposes of preserving law and order and the status quo. And still people try to use him. Still the right and the left dare to invoke his name in support of their causes. My, I'm weary of right wing politicians making Jesus Christ the symbol of Americanism: and somehow claiming that our cause in South East Asia is his cause. I'm equally weary of propoganda from the left that portrays hims as a first century Che Guevorra leading a people's revolt against the imperialists.

We are notoriously reluctant to learn the lesson of Palm Sunday because we prefer to use him - on our terms - for whatever reason suits us. "Who is this?" How do we answer?

Few have the courage to say that he was a fraud, or an imposter; that his claims are arrogant and ludicrous; and that his movement must be crushed. Few have that courage but many act in a manner that accomplishes the same end. Let us not forget that the good, respectable people of Jerusalem would preferred not to have been involved. Let us not forget that neutrality about this man was a luxury he eliminated on this day. Let us apply that to a nation that calls itself Christian and then ignores the Church of Jesus Christ.

Let us apply that to the majority of the people whose names are on the rolls of churches and who behave as if that belonging has no significance whatever. Who is this? How do we answer?

Jesus has always had a good press. People are fond of him. He was a good man who lived a noble life. He was a great teacher, a shinning moral example for all to follow. That is how many would answer today. And it is how Jerusalem would have answered had he not amarched in as Lord and King. The Jesus of opopular pietyiis a good man, but harmless: a sentimental, fairy tale figure whose memory may be toyed with on certain days of the year. He is certainly not a Lord whose will is to be obeyed in the decisions we make every day. Jesus is OK for most people - at good, safe arm's length. But keep him out of my political convictions and the economic polity that determines how I spend my money and the personal prejudices that I harbor toward my fellow man.

That's how the question is answered. We still want Jesus to stay in Galilee - out there on the safe periphery of life; or, perhaps more to the point, securely ensconsed in the church, a captive of beautiful buildings and stately rituals and pious cliches that mean nothing to anyone. But that answer won't do because of what happened on this day. He will not remain on the periphery of life in general, nor on the periphery of your life and mine.

George Macleod has said it rather well: "I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the market place as well as the steeple of the church . . . Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross, between two thieves: on the town garbage heap: at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write his name in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek. . . at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died and that is what he died about. And that is where churchmen ought to be and what churchmen should be about."

A year or two ago there was a popular song entitled "Who Will Answer?"

It was widely used in the Church to punctuate the need for individual responsibility in the common life. I think, however, that a more important question is, "Who will ask?" I think sometimes that our greatest responsibility as a church, and as individual Christians is to ask the right questions: to see our mission in terms of moving into the structures of society in a way that forces people to ask about us and our Lord, "Who Is This?"

It is a day of happy celebration: but it is, finally, a day of deep introspection. It is a day for reflecting on our own faith, and our own response to the Inescapable Question, "Who is this?" Our newest members have answered - and they spoke litergically for all of us - "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.

To answer in that way means to do more than remember his momentary triumph. It is to accept his Lordship: it is to turn over the entirety of one's life to his direction: it is to follow wherever he leads: it is to place the yoke of discipleship over our shoulders and to live out of our faith and trust in him. It is to follow him into the Jerusalems of our lives - not just in the comfort of Sunday Worship; for it is easy here. But into the midst of life with its political ambiguity: into our jobs and vocations: our families: into all our relationships.

Happy celebration. Indeed. But also deeply personal introspection. For on this day he made inescapable, for every one of us, the question, "Who is this?"

Amen.

father, we are grateful for this day in the memory of the church.
to remember that our Lord confronts us daily: that we answer
ve do, or avoid doing. Our father, as he rode triumphantly
in
he reign in our hearts as Lord and Savior.

Amen.